WAITING, IMPATIENTLY

By John M. Buchanan

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Isaiah 2:15
Matthew 24:36-44

"Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."
Matthew 24:42

> **"O Come, O Come Emmanuel," we sing, O God. Advent, new beginnings, precious traditions, and the longing deep in our hearts for what we have learned to call the Day of the Lord, your day, a day when you come with love and power and justice and mercy, a day when we stand up and become all you have created us to be. So, come Emmanuel into this hour, this service of worship, this time of quiet waiting and listening. Come, Emmanuel, and startle us with your truth. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen**

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It's the first Sunday of Advent, the season of expectation and hope, watching and waiting; a time, for thoughtful Christians, of jarring contrasts.

Peter Gomes, preacher to the university at Harvard, says, "One cannot make a growth industry out of Advent expectations." All over the Christian world today, people are hearing the prophecy of Isaiah about the restoration of Jerusalem, while outside the doors of their churches the world is happily celebrating the vitality of the local economy. All over the world today congregations of Christian people are listening to the words of Jesus about the day of the Lord's coming, about being ready and awake and watchful, while outside someone else is eagerly awaited and coming to town; someone who "knows when you are sleeping, and knows where you're awake; knows when you've been good or bad, so be good for goodness' sake!"

You are a privileged congregation this morning. You get to experience the jarring contrasts of the first Sunday of Advent more vividly and dramatically than anyone else in the world. I am told, on good authority, that North Michigan Avenue has become one of the most, some say the most, productive and profitable streets, front foot by front foot, in retail merchandising anywhere in the world. The great engine of our retail economy has been revving up for several months. In the next four weeks, around a billion dollars of business will happen in these few city blocks. All indications are that it will be bigger and better than ever. People will come from north and south, east and west-they are already here, from Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana, busloads of people, thousands and hundreds of thousands of people, and each of them will spend, according to yesterday's Tribune, on average more than $100 per person. And almost everyone of them will pass by our building and our five electric sheep and the Sanctuary, where, inside, it feels a little like a counter-culture activity, with our quiet Advent hymns and our poems about the restoration of Jerusalem and the coming of the Lord.

"We are surrounded," Peter Gomes says, "by signs of good cheer. Lights twinkle overhead, the shops are filled with the apparatus of happiness and commercial joy . . . an organized effort to make us feel good, do good, and spend money." (p. 17, *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*).

I have a confession to make. I love it-all of it. I used to say I didn't, but I wasn't telling the truth. The preacher is supposed to take a dim view of all the commercialization, all the Santa Claus hoopla, all the misuse of our celebration, our symbols, even our music, for commercial gain. So I did it and said it, but I never meant it. The truth is, I love it. I love it when the stores engage in their subtle seduction of our spirits and appetites by putting up a few red bows in October. I love to see the first trucks appear on the avenue to install the famous white lights. I can't hear the Salvation Army band music enough. I do have my limits: the trombonist who plays across the street and whose entire holiday repertoire consists of Winter Wonderland does get to me after a while. But I love it-always have and always will.

I love the appearance of the color and festivity and lights, just as the year grows darker. I love the music, the sublime beauty of Bach's Advent Chorales, the joyful exuberance of Vivaldi's Gloria, the sentimentality of White Christmas, and even the unadulterated childishness of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. I love the fact that we do find ourselves invested in the act of giving to others, even if we are urged on beyond reason by the best the ad makers produce all year. Giving, I continue to believe, is more blessed than receiving. And I love the fact that, though the poor are always with us and poverty continues to scar the face of this selectively affluent society, it seems far less acceptable at Christmas. And I love the cheerfulness, even if it is occasionally forced. And I love the fact that friends and families, even dysfunctional families, are willing to risk having a go at it at Christmas, occasionally successfully.

So I repent of all pulpit complaining and whining at Advent. But what I love most is the reminder that the event to which all this leads is the central event in human history, and by association, the central event in your life and mine. What it all leads to, what it is all about, even if a bit remotely, is the coming of God to redeem the world; a coming we Christians believe once happened and continues to happen; a redeeming and reconciling act that will continue to happen into the future until, get this, the world is redeemed, recreated, reconciled, saved; until, that is to say, the promised day of the Lord.

I love Advent for all the reasons above, but mostly because it reminds us that what we truly celebrate, what stirs our blood and inspires us to faith and trust and courageous living, is not merely a birth in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, but what that birth signals, namely, the sovereign and powerful love of God actively involved in our history and our personal histories and our own futures. "The Lord is coming," Peter Gomes puts it, "not in retrospect, not in a rehearsal of things that happened once long ago. The Lord is coming in a way and a form that we have not yet experienced. We wait for that which we have not yet seen." (p. 3, Ibid.).

Waiting for what we have not seen is a major Biblical theme. The wonderful poetry of Isaiah was written to and for the people of Jerusalem at a very tentative time in their history. The city was a marginal operation, threatened by enemies without. In fact, in the not-too-distant future, the city would be overrun, its buildings destroyed, the people carried off. It was an unthinkable prospect. And the prophet dares to see through it to the other side, to God's restoration, to a time of justice and peace. A "profoundly political alternate future," one scholar calls it. A time when the economy will be transformed from the production of weapons to the production of agriculture, from swords to plowshares, a time of fairness and justice and mercy and kindness. Israel waited in hope for that day for centuries.

In Jesus' day that ancient hope continued to be political. But the expectation was that a warrior messiah would drive out the Romans and restore not only the capital city, but the monarchy of David, with all its imperial power and international influence. Jesus taught his friends another alternate vision. The day of the Lord would not be like that at all. Rather, it would come unexpectedly, perhaps quietly. To see it, to experience it, one would need to be alert, watchful, expectant.

Perhaps our problem with Advent is that we are not very good at waiting. We want to get on with it, now. We want to sing Christmas carols, now. Gomes observes that, "It is not our nature to be patient. Patience, like modesty, belongs to those who need it, and most people who need patience are people who have not yet succeeded in their ambition or their enterprise, people who have not yet achieved. In other words, patience is for those who have to take the long view because they cannot succeed in the short run." (p. 5).

Waiting does seem too passive. Generally speaking, waiting patiently does not seem appropriate. If what you expect is good, impatience always seems more appropriate to me. So Gomes says a good word for impatient waiting, active, hopeful waiting, which eagerly anticipates the future, but in the meantime, is busy working to help bring about that very future.

Peter Gomes recalls his father, a Massachusetts cranberry farmer who, like all farmers, waited for seed time, waited for rain and sunshine, waited for harvest, but was busy, impatiently doing everything that needed to be done to get ready.

Advent is about God's coming in the future and about God's people waiting, impatiently and busily. I was reminded of all of that recently as I read reports of the Chicago Metropolis 2000 Project, sponsored by the Commercial Club of Chicago, written by Elmer Johnson, a member and officer of this congregation. The Metropolis Project analyzes the problems confronting our own Jerusalem, our city, the city of Chicago, and with painstakingly researched argument, lays out a plan for a hopeful future. The challenges before our city are daunting, and unless political and business and civic leaders work urgently and impatiently for their resolution, this city, even this city, will succumb to the economic realities which create, and have already created, two societies-one wealthy, one poor; one suburban, one urban. One privileged; one declining in economic and social prospects. The Project calls for bold new thinking to provide quality education for all children, effective mass transit for all people, and regional thinking and planning that would revolutionize the way we live together as a metropolis. It is a bold, prophetic report-appropriate, I thought, at Advent, when God's people are reminded of God's desire to redeem the world and to establish a human community of mercy and justice and peace.

Advent is a reminder that we wait for an alternative future that is profoundly political, and, at the same time, profoundly personal. Deep in our souls we know that this beautiful season has to do with our own personal history, our past, our own future. God sees the human project in terms of what it could be, what it will be ultimately. God sees through present reality to the potential of the future-not just on the grand scale, but also on the scale of your life and mine. This is profoundly personal.

Did anyone ever do that for you? Did anyone ever see through the present reality of your life to the potential of what you could be, what you could become with a little love, encouragement, and impatient hard work? Did a school teacher ever let you know that you were an extraordinary person, perhaps seeing through your silly, disruptive behavior, your feelings of inadequacy or adolescent self-consciousness, and tell you and show you something of what you could become? Did a coach ever teach you how much more you were as a person than you ever imagined by his or her impatience with mediocrity? Was it a parent who would not give up on you and your potential? I think that's what's going

on in Advent, as we are reminded of God's powerful and creative and disturbing love coming into our personal lives. I think God is behind all of that.

I not only love the season, I'm the one they make the schmaltzy TV commercials for-long distance phone systems reuniting good friends, the Budweiser Clydesdales with jingling Christmas bells pulling their beer wagon through the snow, and Hallmark. Hallmark has my number with all those beautiful children and wonderful grandparents. One of them this year is positively theological. A tentative adolescent girl, obviously a bit of a troublemaker, enters the office of the school guidance counselor, and approaches the desk of a stern, intimidating African-American woman, who is busy writing something. The girl begins immediately to try to explain her disruptive behavior; how she didn't mean it, how it was someone else's fault, how she really is trying. The counselor smiles, hands her a Hallmark card-what else? The disbelieving student opens it and reads, "I'm proud of you." That's what Advent is about: a God who sees what the human project can become, a God who is impatient with injustice and inequality and violence in this city and keeps reminding us that it doesn't have to be this way-that we, all of us, political, business, civic leaders, and ordinary citizens, have the potential to create an alternative future; a God who sees the potential in the project of your life and mine and knows what we were created to become, who knows what we could be.

Ron Suskind, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, has written a fine new book, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League.* The book tells an amazing and inspiring story of a youngster and his mother who are not at all patient with the way things are and generate strong hope in a future that is so remote as to seem like a fantasy, but will not give up and do what they have to do: the hard, demanding work of impatient hopefulness.

Cedric Jennings is his name, a poor, black teen-ager at a blighted Washington, D.C. school, who wants to attend an Ivy League school. He is bright and driven, and his determination to succeed academically costs him a great deal. His father, a convicted drug dealer, instead of supporting and applauding him, calls his son, "a straight A Momma's boy who gets no respect from any of the kids."

It's even worse at school. "Cries of nerd boy, whitey, and geek," rain down upon him. Gang members steal his books, mess with his hair, and beat him up between classes. Teachers seem to resent his brash and boastful intelligence. The principal describes himas "too proud for his own good."

His mother, who occasionally in the past has quit her job and gone on welfare to be able to be with and encourage her son, guides him toward an M.I.T. summer school program for minority children. If you are wondering about affirmative action, and if you're thinking that maybe it isn't such a good idea, if you think that the end of affirmative action in education is not somehow a huge step backward into our racist past, read about this brilliant young lad, doing everything possible, doing the superhuman to get ahead, so far behind his middle class peers from suburban schools that the M.I.T. director concludes that Cedric needs two years of tutoring, not six weeks, to bring him to a level of acceptance at M.I.T. He's brilliant, gifted, and culturally illiterate. He doesn't know the names his peers drop so easily, Sylvia Plath, Ernest Hemingway, Woodrow Wilson. His school has not prepared him for the Ivy League. It was too busy keeping order.

Somehow Cedric makes it into Brown University. He would not, however, make it in California or Washington, or any of the places that have abandoned affirmative action.

The fundamental question I ask about Cedric, however, is what is the source of his determination, his courage, his hopefulness in the face of grim reality? It's his mother, of course, and the black Pentecostal church they attend together. It's his "belief in the

unseen," the author concludes, which is another way of saying, God, the God of Advent, the God of possibilities and potentialities, the God who sees and knows what we can become and is present in our lives to push and prod and nag and encourage and lead us to that future.

At the end of his great book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization,* historian Thomas Cahill turns to the future with an honest and clear eye, "As we look out across our earth we see some signs of hope, many more for despair"-poverty, hunger, a population explosion of enormous proportions that we Westerners insist on ignoring.

But, then, the historian becomes a biblical prophet, writing a passage about Advent:

> What will be lost and what will be saved of our civilization probably lies beyond our power to decide. The future may be germinating today not in a boardroom in London or an office in Washington or in a bank in Tokyo, but in some antic outpost or another-a kindly British orphanage in the grim foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta run by a fiercely single-minded Albanian nun, an easy-going French medical team at the starving edge of the Sahel, a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own Great Hunger, a nursery program to assist convict-mothers at a New York prison; the future may be germinating in some unheralded corner where a great-hearted human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way." (p. 217).

And so we begin again the jarring contrasts of Advent; the profoundly political and profoundly personal vision of God's alternative future; the familiar journey that begins today and ends at a most unlikely place-a little stable behind a Bethlehem inn.

Frederick Buechner put it in a way I think about every Advent:

> "Listen to what's happening in your own life-the experiences that somehow, even if you can't say how, seem either to illumine, or to be illumined by, religious truth. Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes, even if you don't know why the tears are there. Listen to your life."

Be awake, watch, listen, wait-impatiently.

Amen.